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ABSTRACT

This study examined the emotional tone and degree of influence in adolescents' relationships with parents and friends. Early adolescent relationships were compared to middle adolescent relationships, and at both ages, relationships with mothers, fathers, and friends were compared. Using a self-report questionnaire, seventh- and tenth-grade adolescents rated the degree to which they were influenced by their mothers, fathers, and best friends and the frequency with which they experienced positive and negative emotions in their relationships with them. Compared to tenth-graders, seventh-graders reported stronger influence, more frequent positive emotions, and less frequent negative emotions in relationships with parents. There were no grade differences in the degree of influence or the frequency of experiencing positive or negative emotions in relationships with friends. The frequency with which seventh-graders experienced positive emotions in relationships with friends did not differ from the frequency with which they experienced positive emotions in relationships with mothers and fathers. Tenth-graders, however, experienced fewer positive emotions in relationships with fathers than in relationships with friends. Both seventh- and tenth-graders reported more negative emotions in relationships with parents than with friends. Mothers' and fathers' influence was stronger than that of friends for seventh-graders, but only mothers continued to be more influential than friends in the tenth grade. (Contains 18 references.) (Author/EV)

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Adolescents' Relationships with Parents and Friends: Age Differences in Emotional Tone and Degree of Influence

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the emotional tone and degree of influence in adolescents' relationships with parents and friends. Early adolescent relationships were compared to middle adolescent relationships, and at both ages, relationships with mothers, fathers, and friends were compared. Using a self-report questionnaire, seventh- and tenth-grade adolescents rated the degree to which they were influenced by their mothers, fathers, and best friends and the frequency with which they experienced positive and negative emotions in their relationships with mothers, fathers, and best friends. Compared to tenth-graders, seventh-graders reported stronger influence, more frequent positive emotions, and less frequent negative emotions in relationships with parents. There were no grade differences in the degree of influence or the frequency of experiencing positive or negative emotions in relationships with friends. The frequency in which seventh-graders experienced positive emotions in relationships with friends did not differ from the frequency in which they experienced positive emotions in relationships with mothers and fathers. Tenth-graders, however, experienced fewer positive emotions in relationships with fathers than in relationships with friends. Both seventh- and tenth-graders reported more negative emotions in relationships with parents than with friends. Mothers' and fathers' influence was stronger than that of friends for seventh-graders but only mothers continued to be more influential than friends in the tenth grade. Implications of these findings are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Relationships with both parents and friends play a significant role in the lives of adolescents. Both types of relationships have strong emotional components (Papini, Roggman, & Anderson, 1991) and both influence adolescents' development (Meeus, 1989). Although there is general agreement that parent-adolescent relationships are transformed during adolescence (Collins and Repinski, 1994), a lack of consensus exists among theorists and researchers regarding how the emotional tone and the degree of influence in these relationships change.

Studies, such as one by Papini, Roggman, and Anderson (1991), suggest that the emotional tone in adolescent-parent relationships becomes more negative as adolescents progress from junior high to high school. They found that, with increasing age, relationships with parents involved more expressions of negative emotions and fewer expressions of positive emotions. However, other studies found that adolescents' relationships with parents do not show age-related differences in closeness (Blyth et. al, 1982) or attachment (O'Koon, 1997). Research findings on age-related changes in the degree of influence in adolescent-parent relationships show similar inconsistencies. Some suggest that older adolescents are less influenced by their parents than younger adolescents (Alsaker, 1995), but others suggest that parents' influence remains strong throughout adolescence (Meeus, 1989).

Adolescents' relationships with friends also show developmental changes during adolescence. Compared to children, early adolescents' relationships with

friends are more intimate and adolescents increasingly turn to their friends for emotional support (Buhrmester & Furman, 1987). According to Shulman et al (1996), "intimacy entails closeness, affection, disclosure, and commitment between friends." Some evidence suggests that intimacy in friendships increases during adolescence (Blyth & Ttager, 1988), but other evidence suggests that it does not (Sharabany, Gershoni, & Hoffman, 1981). Moreover, it is unclear how relationship intimacy is associated with the emotional tone or degree of influence in adolescents' relationships. As Shulman et al (1996) argued, increased intimacy may lead adolescent friends to control or conform to each other in order to enhance closeness. On the other hand, intimacy also involves respecting each others individuality, which could lead to direct influence.

In light of these inconsistencies, we examined the emotional tone and degree of influence in adolescents' relationships with their mothers, fathers, and best friends. Specifically, our goals were:

- To investigate differences between early adolescents' and middle adolescents' reports of the frequency of experiencing positive and negative emotions in relationships with mothers, fathers, and best friends.
- To investigate differences between early adolescents' and middle adolescents' reports of the degree of influence from mothers, fathers, and best friends.
- To compare adolescents' reports of the degree of influence and the frequency of experiencing positive and negative emotions in their relationships with parents to their relationships with friends in both seventh and tenth grade.

METHOD

Participants

- 64 seventh-grade adolescents (35 male, 29 female) from a rural school
- 43 tenth-grade adolescents (15 male, 28 female) from a rural school

Procedures

- All participants received parental consent and were given a stipend of $5.00
- Self-report questionnaire data was collected while participants were in school

Measures

- Positive Emotions & Negative Emotions - the frequency during the past week that adolescents experienced six positive emotions (e.g., "satisfied" and "happy") and 13 negative emotions (e.g., "frustrated" and "disappointed") in relationships with their mothers, fathers, and best-friends, on a scale of 1 (never or almost never) to 5 (almost always).
- Degree of Influence - the average rating of how much mothers, fathers, and same-sex best friends influenced 45 different domains of adolescents' lives (e.g., "Whether I use drugs" and "My religious practices"), on a scale of 1 (not at all) to 5 (a great extent).

RESULTS

Grade Differences

Our results suggest that between early and middle adolescence emotional tone in adolescents' relationships with parents become more negative, especially with mothers. In addition, the results suggest that parents are less influential during middle adolescence than early adolescence. In contrast, we did not find differences between early and middle adolescents in their experiences of positive and negative emotions or degree of influence. Specifically, we found the following:

- Seventh-graders experienced more positive emotions in their relationships with both mothers (F (1, 105) = 9.170, $p < .01$) and fathers (F (1,98) = 8.401, $p < .01$) than did tenth-graders. (See Figure 1).
- Tenth-graders experienced more negative emotions in their relationships with mothers than did seventh-graders (F (1, 105) = 3.965, $p < .05$). (See Figure 2).
- Seventh-graders reported stronger influence from both mothers (F (1, 95) = 18.067, $p < .001$) and fathers (F (1, 90)= 13.495, $p < .001$), than did tenth-graders. (See Figure 3).

Relationship Differences

Our results suggest that emotional tone is generally more positive in relationships with friends than with parents. Although there were no differences in the frequency with which adolescents experienced positive emotions in relationships with friends and mothers, experiences of negative emotions were most frequent in relationships with mothers. Despite the higher frequency of negative emotions in relationships with parents, parents tend to have stronger influence on adolescents than do friends.

Seventh Grade

- There were no significant differences in the frequency of seventh-graders' experiences of positive emotions in relationships with mothers, fathers, or friends.
- Seventh-graders more frequently experienced negative emotions in relationships with both mothers (t (63) = 5.344, $p < .001$) and fathers (t (61) = 3.629, $p < .01$) than in relationships with friends. (See Figure 5).
- Seventh-graders reported less influence from friends than from mothers (t (52) = 9.550, $p < .001$) or from fathers (t (49) = 5.278, $p < .001$). (See Figure 6).

Tenth Grade

- No significant difference was found between tenth-graders experience of positive emotions in their relationships with mothers and in their relationships with friends.
- Tenth-grade adolescents more frequently experienced positive emotions in relationships with friends than in relationships with fathers (t (38) = -2.923, $p < .01$). (See Figure 4).
- Tenth-graders more frequently experienced negative emotions in relationships with both mothers (t (42) = 4.996, $p < .001$) and fathers (t (38) = 3.441, $p < .001$) than in relationships with friends. (See Figure 5).
- Tenth-graders reported stronger influence from mothers than from friends (t (41) = 8.158, $p < .001$). (See Figure 6).
- There were no significant differences in the reports of influence from friends and fathers.

DISCUSSION

- Our results suggest that emotional tone and degree of influence in adolescents' relationships with parents change between early and middle adolescence. Emotional tone in relationships with mothers and fathers becomes more negative, especially in relationships with mothers. In addition, middle adolescents are less influenced by their parents than early adolescents. Both of these age-related differences may result from increases in autonomy; with increasing age, adolescents attempt to establish their own identity and sense of self (Smollar & Youniss, 1989). Requests for more freedom from parents can be a source of conflict and may be partially responsible for the increase in negative emotions.

- When adolescents' relationships with mothers, fathers, and friends are directly compared, the mother-adolescent relationship stands out as having the most impact on adolescents. Adolescents' relationships with mothers were the most influential and were equally high or higher than relationships with fathers or friends in experiences of positive and negative emotions. The differences between adolescents' relationships with mothers and fathers may be due to the greater involvement of mothers in their children's lives. The frequent experience of positive emotions in these relationships is consistent with past research indicating that adolescents feel closer to their mothers and believe that mothers are more understanding than are fathers (Barnes & Olson, 1985). The frequent experience of negative emotions in relationships with mothers is consistent with research showing that adolescents experience more conflicts with mothers (Holmbeck & Hill, 1991). Mothers are more likely than fathers to be "in-charge" and to set limits and turn down requests. Mothers are also more likely than fathers to back off when adolescents challenge their authority (Steinberg, 1990), positively reinforcing adolescents' confrontational behavior.

- We did not find grade differences in the frequency of adolescents' experience of positive or negative emotions in relationships with friends. If emotional tone is related to relationship intimacy, it would suggest that intimacy does not increase between early and middle adolescence. This is consistent with findings by Sharabany, Gershoni, & Hoffman (1981) who reported no increases in intimacy in their sample of 11- to 17-year olds. On the other hand, it seems likely that the emotional tone in a relationship is not related to intimacy, but rather is linked to the companionship function of friendships. Enjoyable companionship is a feature of friendship relationships at all ages beginning in early childhood (Parke, 1994).

- Influence from friends was not greater in the tenth grade than in the seventh grade. This is inconsistent with a number of previous studies indicating a peak in influence from friends during middle adolescence

(e.g., Urberg, Cheng, & Shyu, 1991). We are uncertain why our sample did not show this pattern of influence. Perhaps because our measure of influence relied on adolescents' self-reports, it may have failed to capture influence from friends that is subtle and indirect. Social desirability may have also been a problem. Older adolescents, with their increasing autonomy, may be particularly reluctant to admit being influenced by friends. However, it is important to note that although friends' influence does not become stronger with increased age in absolute terms, friends' influence relative to parents' influence does increase since parents' influence declines as adolescents get older.

- Adolescents reported more influence from parents than from friends in this study. This finding suggests that popular concerns about parents' declining influence during adolescence are unwarranted. Influence from friends appears to be rather limited. Meeus (1989) found that adolescents are influenced more by their parents in future-oriented domains, whereas peers have more influence regarding current events and leisure-time activities. Because our study included forty-five different domains of influence (both future and current), we can conclude that parents have more overall influence than friends throughout adolescence.

Figure 1. Grade Differences in Adolescents' Reports of the Frequency of Experiencing Positive Emotions in Their Relationships

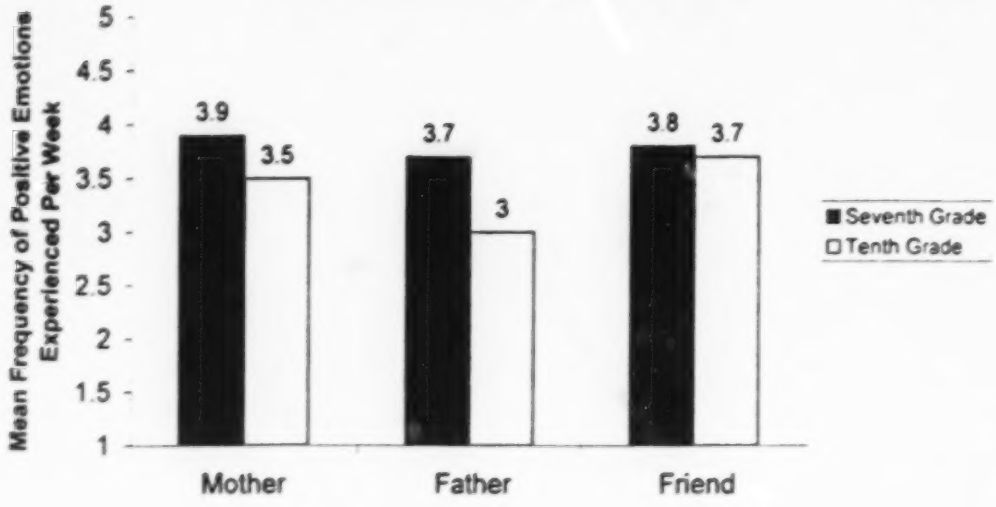


Figure 2. Grade Differences in Adolescents' Reports of the Frequency of Experiencing Negative Emotions in Their Relationships

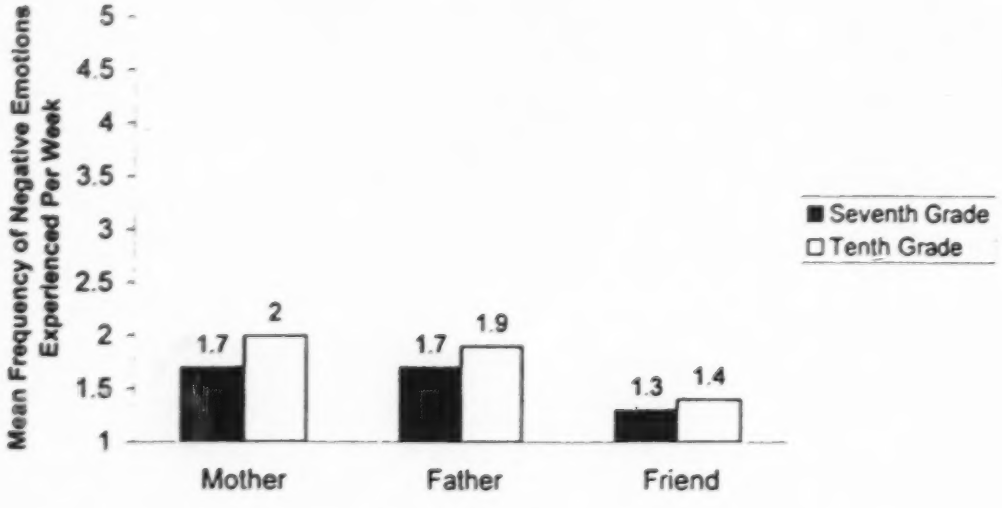


Figure 3. Grade Differences in Adolescents' Reports of Influence

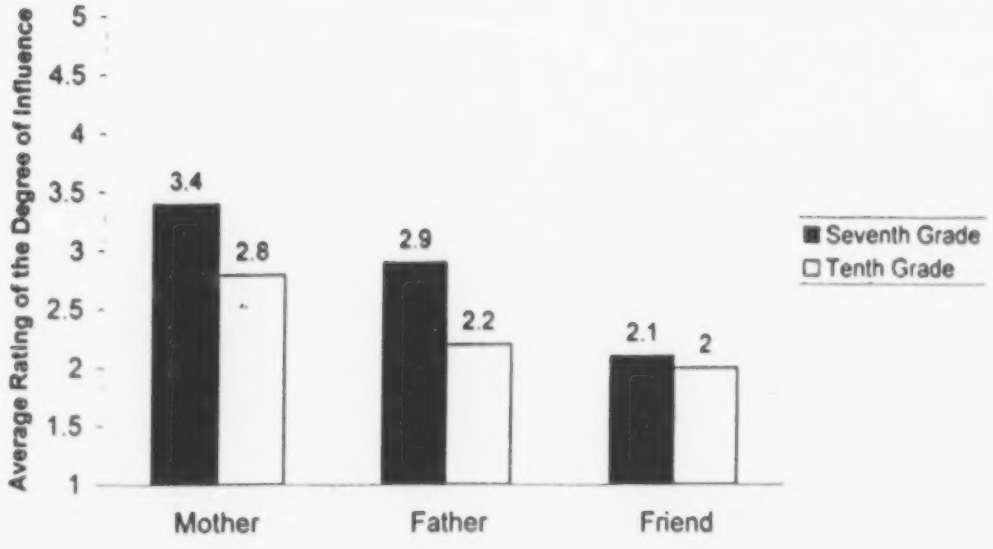


Figure 4. Relationship Differences in Adolescents' Reports of the Frequency of Experiencing Positive Emotions

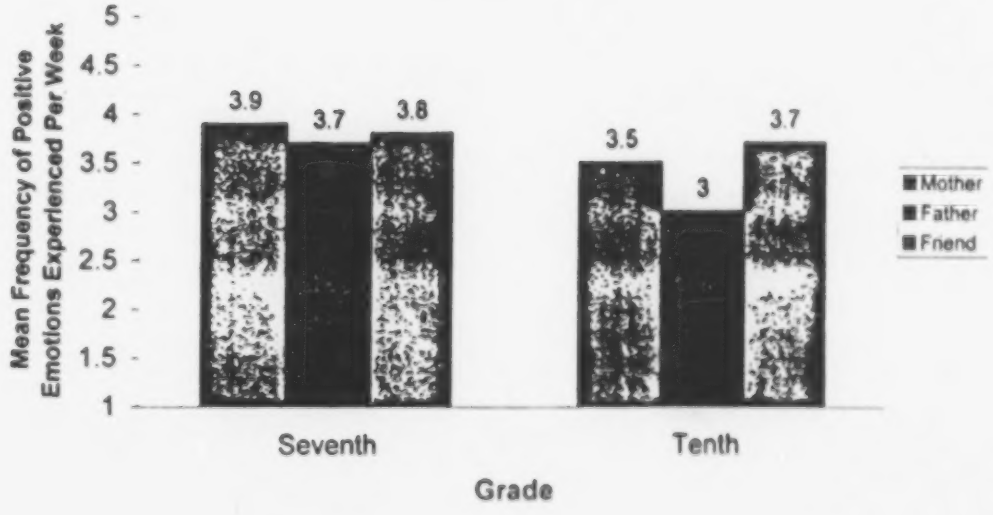


Figure 5. Relationship Differences in Adolescents' Reports of the Frequency of Experiencing Negative Emotions

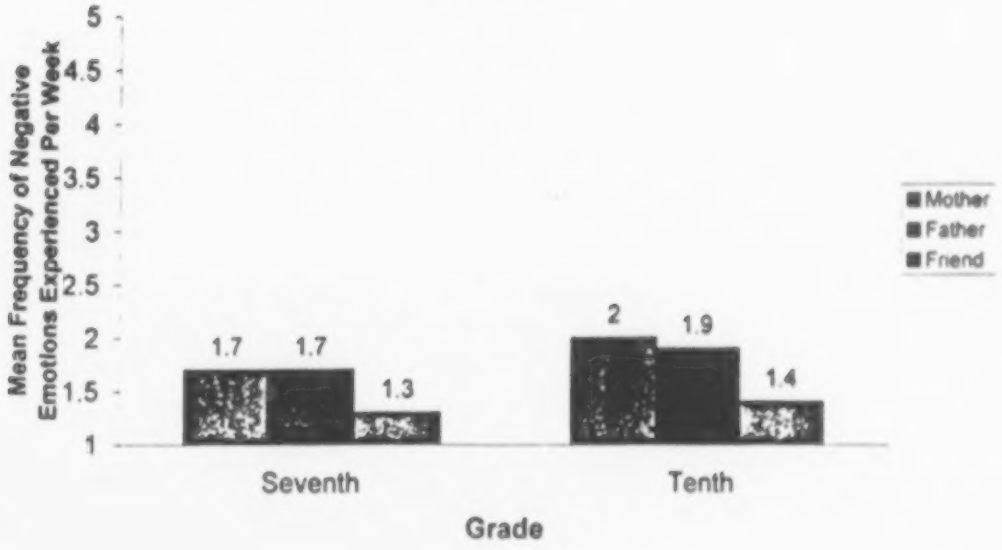
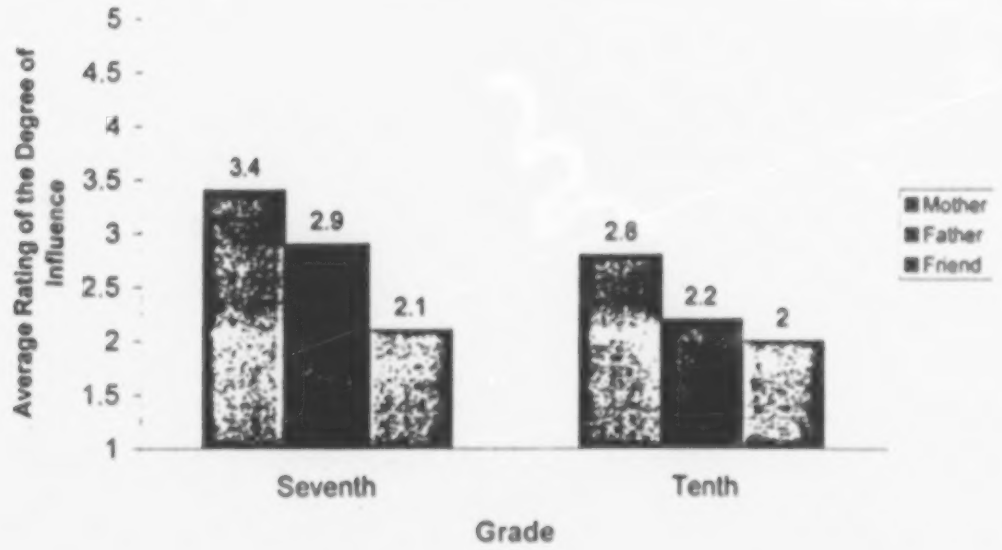


Figure 6. Relationship Differences in Adolescents' Reports of Influence



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